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ABSTRACT

This study tests the hypothesis that men's and women's psychological commitment to parenting and work exerts an influence on their expectations for and perceptions of their children's behavior. Subjects were 104 fathers and 194 mothers, each with a preschool child, who were employed in a wide range of occupations. Data were collected by means of mailed questionnaires, which included new and existing measures of: (1) work and family life; (2) perceptions and expectations of children's behavior; (3) spousal support for work and family roles; and (4) role strain. Findings indicated that commitments to work and parenting were associated with fathers' expectations for and mothers' perceptions of children's behavior. Fathers' expectations for mature behavior were influenced by patterns of work and parenting commitments. Fathers with stronger work commitment expected more mature behavior. Mothers' perceptions of their preschoolers' behavior were most favorable when mothers held high commitments to both work and parenting. For fathers, low parenting commitment was associated with greater role strain. No significant associations between role strain and work and parenting commitments were found for mothers. For mothers and fathers, higher role strain was accompanied by less favorable perceptions of their preschool children. For both parents, greater spousal support was related to more favorable perceptions of children. (Author/RH)

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Working Parents' Expectations and Perceptions of Their Young Children

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ABSTRACT

This study tests the hypothesis that men's and women's psychological commitment to work and parenting influences their expectations for and perceptions of their children's behavior. Subjects were 104 fathers and 194 mothers, each with a preschool child, employed in a wide range of occupations. Data were collected by means of mailed questionnaires and included new and existing measures of family and work life. perceptions and expectations of children's behavior, spousal support for work and family roles, and role strain. All measures had demonstrated reliability and validity. Results indicated that commitments to work and parenting are associated with fathers' expectations for children's behavior and mothers' perceptions of children's behavior. Fathers' expectations for mature behavior were influenced by the patterns of work and parenting commitments. Fathers with stronger work commitment expected more mature behavior. Mothers' perceptions of their preschoolers' behavior were most favorable when mothers held high commitments to both work and parenting. For mothers and fathers, higher role strain was accompanied by less favorable perceptions of their preschool children. Again for both parents, greater spousal support was related to more favorable perceptions of children.

INTRODUCTION

The substantial increase in women's labor force participation over the past few decades, especially among mothers of preschool age children, has prompted numerous empirical investigations of the consequences of maternal employment for children. Recent reviews of the maternal employment literature have pointed to a need to look beyond the mere fact of employment for factors that may moderate the meaning and consequences of maternal employment for the family (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982; Hoffman, 1984). As well, the literature on the consequences of parental employment has tended to overlook the implications of fathers' commitment to work on the socialization and development of children. The current investigation focuses on the psychological salience of men's and women's work and family roles, in an attempt to bridge the gap between parents' employment, mothers' and fathers' socialization practices, and preschool children's development.

In the present report, we examine selected research questions from a larger project. Specific issues addressed in the present report are:

- 0 whether different degrees of work and parenting commitments, considered jointly, are related to parenting styles, as indexed by expectations for mature behavior from preschool children;
- 0 whether parents with strong commitments to work and parenting view their children as favorably as parents with weaker commitments;
- 0 whether the extent of work and parenting commitments are associated with parents' role strain, and
- 0 whether sources of support within the family (i.e., spousal support) for combining work and family roles affect parents' role strain and perceptions of their children's behavior.

Sex of child, sex of parent, and birth order (i.e., age of oldest child) factors are considered in the analyses.

METHODS

SUBJECTS

Subjects of this study were 104 fathers and 194 mothers living in dual-earner households, who were parents of a preschool child. The sample was largely caucasian (90%), well-educated, and middle class. The mean age for fathers was 35.1 years (s.d. = 5.8); for mothers, 32.4 years (s.d. = 4.7). Parents had an average of two children. Preschool children's ages ranged from 3.0 to 5.2 (M = 4.0, s.d. = 6.9 months). Fifty-four percent of these preschool children were first-borns. Of the later borns, two-thirds were in families with the oldest child less than 12 years of age and one-third were in families where the oldest was over 12 years old.

PROCEDURE

Letters with a mail-back form and envelope were distributed to 68 preschools in four southern California communities. Parents of 3-4 year old children were asked to return the form if they were interested in participating in the study. Following receipt of the form, surveys were mailed to one or both parents in 286 dual-earner families who met study criteria. Surveys to married couples were mailed several weeks apart, with instructions that they be filled out separately by husbands and wives. Usable surveys were returned from at least one member of 201 families (70.3% return rate): 194 mothers and 104 fathers. Of this final sample, 96 women and 96 men were married to one another.

Surveys took parents 1-2 hours to complete. To control for order effects, two versions of the surveys were compiled; no order effects were found.

MEASURES

The measures used in the present report are described below. Standard demographic data and detailed descriptions of occupations were obtained from all subjects. Sample means and reliability coefficients for measures described below appear in Table 1. Researcher-developed measures were pilot-tested prior to the initiation of the study to establish their reliability and validity.

Work Commitment

This 17-item scale was designed to address the centrality of work to the self, salience of work relative to other activities, and level of aspirations. Respondents indicated their extent of agreement/disagreement with each item on a 6-point scale; high scores reflect greater work commitment. Sample item: "I want to advance to the top in my career, even if it involves some costs in other areas of my life."

Parenting Commitment

This 17-item, 6-point scale is analogous in content to the Work Commitment scale. Thus, it assesses the centrality of parenting to the self, salience of parenting in relation to other activities, and aspirations to perform well as a parent. Sample item: "When I meet new people, one of the first things I tell them about is my child."

In this paper, the juxtaposition of work and parenting commitments is considered, and a categorical variable for Joint Work and Parenting Commitment was created using median splits. Parents were scored as either low on both scales ("1"); low on work, high on parenting ("2"); high on work; low on parenting ("3"), or high on both scales ("4").

Maturity Demands

On this 30-item scale, parents indicated how often they expected their child to behave in certain ways. Response options range from 1 ("never") to 7 ("always"). Subscales were created in three conceptually distinct areas: An 11-item Self-Control Demands scale; a 9-item Independence Demands scale, and an 8-item Prosocial Demands scale. Sample items: Self-control Demands: You expect child to "refrain from interrupting when you are on the phone." Independence Demands: You expect child to "find ways to entertain him/herself without your guidance." Prosocial Demands: You expect child to "comfort other children when they are unhappy."

Child Behavior Checklist

Parents were asked to describe various aspects of their preschool child's behavior during the past 3 months. This measure is a composite of Peterson and Zill's Behavior

Problem Index, the NLSY "How my child usually acts" scale, and Block and Block's California Child Q-Sort. Scales were formed to assess parental perceptions of their preschoolers' behavior including a composite scale representing positive child attributes (18 items) and a composite scale composed of problem behaviors (28 items from the Behavior Problem Index). These scales represent several specific dimensions of children's behavior: aggression, independence/dependence, prosocial interaction, and positive/negative affect. In completing the checklist, parents were asked to indicate on a 3-point scale the extent to which each item described their child. Sample items: Child "is helpful and cooperative"; child "tends to fight, hit, take toys when playing with other children."

Parental Well-Being

In this report, we present results of one of our well-being measures: Role Strain. Men and women indicated on a 32-item, 4-point scale the extent to which they felt burdened or strained by their efforts to combine work and family responsibilities, and their experiences of spillover from one domain to the other. High scores indicate greater role strain. Sample item: "Problems with childcare arrangements interfere with my schedule at work."

Spousal Support

Spousal support for work and parenting is a 27-item, 4-point scale that assesses the extent to which each spouse perceives the other to help with work and family problems, tasks, and responsibilities. Sample item: "If I have work-related tasks to do, my spouse takes on extra chores at home."

RESULTS

The associations between joint work and parenting commitments and both maturity expectations and perceptions of children's positive and problem behavior were analyzed using multivariate analyses of covariance. Factors were joint commitments (4 level) and child gender (2 level) or birth order (3 level; preschooler is first born; preschooler is later

born and oldest child is under 12; preschooler is later born and oldest child is over 12). Level of education and occupational prestige were covariates. Associations between parents' role strain, spousal support and perceptions of child behavior were analyzed using Pearson correlations.

Joint commitments and parental expectations for mature behavior.

Fathers. Fathers' work and parenting commitments exerted a significant main effect on maturity demands ($F_{(9,269)} = 2.30$, $p < .05$). Significant univariate associations were found between fathers' work and parenting commitments and demands for self-control ($F(3,93) = 3.25$, $p < .05$) and prosocial behavior ($F(3,93) = 3.61$, $p < .05$). High work commitment groups (Groups 3 and 4) held higher demands for self-control ($t_{(99)} = -2.63$, $p < .01$) and for prosocial behavior ($t_{(100)} = -2.38$, $p < .05$) than low work commitment groups (Groups 1 and 2). See Figure 1A. Fathers' expectations for mature behavior did not vary by child gender ($F_{(3,93)} = .64$, n.s.) or by the birth order status of their preschooler ($F(6,172) = 1.40$, n.s.).

Mothers. Associations between mothers' joint commitments to work and parenting and expectations for mature behavior were not significant (F's < 1.61, n.s.); effects of child gender and birth order also were not significant (F's < 2.60, n.s.).

Joint commitments and parental perceptions of child behavior.

Fathers. Main and interactive effects of joint commitments and child gender on father's perceptions of their children's positive and problem behaviors were not significant (F's < 2.09, n.s.). However, a significant main effect of birth order did emerge ($F(6,172) = 2.67$, $p < .05$). The univariate F's indicated significant effects for perceptions of problem behaviors ($p < .05$), and perceptions of positive behaviors ($p < .05$). Post-hoc contrasts confirmed that fathers whose oldest child was over 12 years perceived their preschoolers more favorably (fewer problem behaviors, [$t = 3.36$, $p < .01$], more positive behaviors [$t = 2.15$, $p < .05$]).

Mothers. Joint commitments exerted a significant main effect on mothers' perceptions of their preschoolers' behavior ($F(6,362) = 2.44$, $p < .05$). The univariate test was significant for perceptions of positive behaviors ($p < .01$). Results of post-hoc contrasts indicated that mothers with high commitments to both work and parenting perceived their preschoolers most favorably (Group 4 vs. 1, 2 and 3 combined, [$t = 3.94$, $p < .001$]). See Figure 1B.

Joint commitments and parents' psychological well-being

Fathers. Results of an ANCOVA analysis did not demonstrate a significant association between joint commitments and fathers' level of role strain ($F_{(3,97)} = 1.83$, n.s.). However, the zero-order association between parenting commitment and role strain was significant ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$); thus, men who had low parenting commitments reported more role strain. The zero-order correlation with work commitment was not significant ($r = -.16$).

Mothers. A significant relationship between joint commitments and role strain was not found for mothers (ANCOVA, $F_{(3,193)} = 1.83$, n.s.). The zero-order correlations revealed only a weak, negative association between parenting commitment and role strain and was not significant at $p < .01$ ($r = -.13$).

Parental strain, support and perceptions of child behavior

Fathers. Fathers with higher levels of role strain perceived their preschoolers less favorably: children were described as engaging in more problem behaviors ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), and less positive behaviors ($r = -.22$, $p < .05$). On the other hand, support from spouse was associated with perceptions of fewer problem behaviors ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$), and more positive behaviors (r's = .24, $p < .01$).

Mothers. Similar zero-order relationships were revealed for mothers: increasing levels of role strain were accompanied by perceptions of the child's behavior as more negative (problem behaviors, $r = .22$, $p < .01$) and less favorable (positive behaviors, $r = -.20$, $p < .01$). Spousal support was related to more favorable perceptions of the child (less problem behaviors, $r = -.24$, $p < .001$; more positive behaviors, $r = .28$, $p < .001$).

CONCLUSIONS

- Commitments to work and parenting are associated with fathers' expectations for children's behavior and mothers' perceptions of children's behavior.
- Fathers' expectations for mature behavior are influenced by the patterns of work and parenting commitments. Fathers who are high on work commitment, in conjunction with high or low parenting commitment, expect more mature behavior.
- Mothers' perceptions of their preschoolers' behavior are most favorable when mothers hold high commitments to both work and parenting (n.b., all mothers in this study were employed).
- For fathers, low parenting commitment is associated with greater role strain. No significant associations between role strain and work and parenting commitments were found for mothers.
- For mothers and fathers, higher role strain is accompanied by less favorable perceptions of their preschool children. Again for both parents, greater spousal support for work and parenting is related to more favorable perceptions of children.

Our plans for the future include the construction of a composite measure of parental socialization styles. We then will examine the influence of work and parenting commitments on socialization practices. The potential for social support from the family, workplace, and community to mediate these associations will be tested in dual-earner, single-earner, and single parent families.

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TABLE 1

Table of Measures

Measure	N of Subjects	Mean	SD	Range	Coefficient Alpha
Work Commitment					
Fathers	104	3.74	.65	1.65 - 5.47	.78
Mothers	194	3.55	.72	1.71 - 5.47	.83
Parenting Commitment					
Fathers	104	4.11	.48	3.18 - 5.29	.71
Mothers	194	4.30	.50	2.76 - 5.47	.71
Education Level					
Fathers	104	5.43	1.56	1 - 8	—
Mothers	194	4.98	1.42	2 - 8	—
Occupational Prestige					
Fathers	104	51.88	12.65	24.36 - 81.09	—
Mothers	193	45.80	12.06	18 - 81.09	—
Maturity Demands:					
Self-Control					
Fathers	104	5.02	.59	3.09 - 6.36	.75
Mothers	194	4.92	.72	2.45 - 6.55	.81
Independence					
Fathers	104	4.71	.59	3.44 - 6.56	.72
Mothers	194	4.68	.60	2.89 - 6.22	.67
Prosocial Behavior					
Fathers	104	4.92	.62	3.13 - 6.13	.73
Mothers	194	4.96	.75	3.00 - 6.75	.79
Perceptions of Child Behavior:					
Problem Behaviors					
Fathers	104	1.38	.28	1.00 - 2.21	.89
Mothers	194	1.34	.30	1.00 - 2.87	.93

Positive Behaviors					
Fathers	104	2.39	.26	1.78 - 2.89	.76
Mothers	194	2.46	.25	1.61 - 3.00	.77
Support from Spouse (for Work and Parenting)					
Fathers	104	3.17	.42	1.82 - 4.00	.93
Mothers	194	3.13	.49	1.37 - 3.93	.93
Parents' Psychological Well-Being:					
Role Strain					
Fathers	104	2.13	.44	1.13 - 3.16	.90
Mothers	194	2.37	.53	1.16 - 3.59	.92